

## **Pertussis (Whooping Cough)**

**WHAT IS IT?** Whooping cough (pertussis) is a serious respiratory infection caused by bacteria. Symptoms begin with a runny nose and then progress to persistent coughing. Fits of coughing may be followed by a whooping gasp to breathe in air. Coughing fits may also lead to vomiting. The illness can last for 6 to 10 weeks, or longer.

Pertussis is most severe in infants, especially under 6 months of age. It can cause pneumonia, seizures, brain damage, and respiratory failure. Hospitalization is usually necessary, and the disease can be fatal. Older children and adults can develop milder symptoms and can spread the disease to infants.

**HOW IS IT SPREAD?** Pertussis is spread by contact with mucus from the nose or saliva. It is spread by coughing and sneezing; kissing on the lips; and sharing food, eating utensils and mouthed toys. It is also spread by touching hands to nose and mouth, reusing tissues, and forgetting to wash hands after blowing the nose. It spreads most easily in crowded, poorly ventilated rooms

**WHEN IT IS CONTAGIOUS?** Pertussis is most contagious during the early symptoms of the runny nose, but can remain contagious for up to 3 weeks. After 5 days of effective antibiotic treatment, it is no longer contagious. After exposure to pertussis, it can take 1 to 3 weeks to develop the illness.

**HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED AND TREATED?** Pertussis is diagnosed by the typical symptoms and cultures of swabs taken from the nose and throat. Blood tests and other tests may also be done. Pertussis is treated with antibiotic medications. For infants with severe illness, hospitalization and close monitoring of breathing are necessary. Oxygen, special feeding and other treatments may be needed.

If a person has been recently exposed to pertussis, antibiotic medication and immunization boosters can help prevent the illness.

**SHOULD THE CHILD STAY HOME?** A child with pertussis should stay home until 5 days after the start of antibiotic treatment and when he/she feels well enough to participate.

### **HOW CAN WE LIMIT THE SPREAD?**

Immunize all infants and children years against pertussis. The exception would be children with severe and/or progressive neurological problems.

- ❖ Report the illness to the local health department. They will help determine who is infected, who needs treatment, and other measures to stop the spread.
- ❖ Cough and sneeze into your elbow and away from people. If you cough or sneeze into your hand or a tissue, wash your hands afterwards.
- ❖ Wipe runny noses with a clean tissue, throw the tissue away, and then wash your hands.
- ❖ Don't share food, pacifiers or bottles. Wash eating utensils and drinking cups well between uses
- ❖ Clean and disinfect mouthed toys and dining tables after each use. Clean and disinfect water fountains, telephone receivers and other frequently handled items daily.
- ❖ Discourage nose picking. Try to limit touching the eyes, nose and mouth.
- ❖ Don't kiss children on the mouth—hug them and kiss them on the forehead instead.
- ❖ Maximize outdoor play and indoor ventilation.